

# Social projects financed from European Funds as a community development instrument in Romania

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## Abstract

Community development is a broadly used concept that describes the process of building sustainable communities, by promoting social justice and mutual support. Although it refers to all community groups, it usually aims at supporting the disadvantaged and marginalized groups in overcoming their difficulties and at reducing social and economic disparities. One of the most efficient instruments of achieving community development are social programs, implemented through social projects. Since its' accession to the European Union and even in the pre-accession phase, Romania benefited from the financial instruments made available by the EU for all member or future member states. These instruments were translated into a big step ahead in the direction of social inclusion, reducing social and economical disparities, integration of minorities and support for vulnerable groups. Romania must take full advantage of these financing opportunities and convert the European support into the most efficient modality of addressing its' most urgent and difficult social problems.

**Keywords:** *community development; social projects; social problems; European funds; implementation; development.*

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## Introduction

This article highlights the existing conditionality between the social projects aiming at the vulnerable groups and community development, attempting to capture the importance and advantages of the implementation of social projects in Romania.

The topic was chosen starting with the importance that we devote to the partnership between the European bodies, state institutions and civil society that join efforts to prevent and correct the most severe current social issues and to empower the most disadvantaged social groups to withstand present and future challenges. A powerful society is the one that does not overlook the struggling of the disadvantaged communities but fights to support and integrate them in order to grant them a favourable environment for evolution and empowerment.

Community development is a long-term process that aim to build active and sustainable communities based on social justice and mutual respect. Furthermore, an inherent objective of community development is to empower humans to interfere more easily in circumstances that concern them directly. The community must provide the opportunity to independently develop approaches to solve internal issues.

Social issues have existed since always, they represent the truth of modern times, but what we can achieve as members of the society is to adopt a pro-active

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attitude and to grow civic spirit, fact that should turn into an essential and immutable feature of each citizen.

Projects "have become an important instrument of the international assistance and of the development administration, whereas they seem to provide major benefits in comparison to other manners of planning and management" (Rondinelli 1983). Although subject to substantial criticism during the recent years, the advantages that they provide reveal that is unlikely to be abandoned or their importance to be diminished over years ahead. By planning, assessing and implementation of projects, they might play a bigger role in experimenting social policies and might turn into „planning tools and strategic management" (Rondinelli 1983).

## **The concept of community development**

### **Definitions**

In order to explain the concept of community development, we need to clear up the terms used in its composition. The term of development thus implies the action of development and its outcome, in other words „the process in which someone or something grows or changes and becomes more advanced" (Cambridge English Dictionary 2019). Furthermore, community is defined as „people living in one particular area or people who are considered as a unit because of their common interests, social group or nationality" (Cambridge English Dictionary 2019).

In 1887, the German classic sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies stated, in one of his fundamental works that „community is present one way or another when people are organically connected to each other or when they reciprocally prove themselves [...]" (Tönnies 2016).

Community is a social system in which the relationships are personal, informal, traditional and built on feelings as opposed to the societies, where the relationships are impersonal, formal (Alexiu and Anăstăsoaie 2001). Given the fact that the existence of a community is defined by the sense of belonging to that community, we may define community development as a social process whereby the members of the community adjust to world progress.

Community development is first of all operated within the disadvantaged areas or within those sections of population affected by exclusion or by harsh living conditions and submitted to deal with oppression and inequity. A key role for community development is held by the relationships between the targeted groups and other members of the community, other local groups or organizations, public bodies and private sector organizations. Despite the fact that it may be applicable for different population groups, community development usually aims at the level of the communities impacted by poverty, by unprivileged and discriminated individuals.

Identified as a „an implementation that targets the assistance of persons aiming at the improvement of life quality within neighbourhoods, by identifying, building and using social media and the community assets in order to provide self-sufficiency, capacity and control" (Harris and White 2013: p. 101), community development may be described as the process of solving social issues with distinct and necessary stages for for achieving the desired goal.

## **Genesis and principles of community development**

The occurrence of the idea of community development, community action and involvement is hard to be identified within the scientific literature, as there is no

indication of a temporal landmark to underline the actual beginning of community development programs. Nevertheless, there have existed types of evolved assistance that were implemented by members of certain communities since ancient times. People conceived mechanisms that worked at the point where their peers were experiencing difficulties and were traditionally perpetuating as trans-generation forwarded values. These mechanisms remained valid even to this day and work when community issues do not reach the point of incapacity management through its own means. For example, a family issue might be solved through the mutual assistance approach of the members of the small or extended family (material support, moral and administrative support in case of vulnerable events, etc.).

However, over the years, in certain circumstances the process of community development hindered up to absolute incapacity the resolution of certain problems according to the traditional pattern. Against the background of globalization, of economical and industrial accelerating development and of the disturbance of natural balance, certain social issues became more complex and turned into social, national or global phenomena that can no longer be prevented, controlled or ceased, except by implementing wide-ranging strategic mechanisms.

The systematic concern for community development settled in the late 80's and „raised within two different social and economic contexts. The issue of community development was marginally approached within developed countries, whereas within poor communities it was massively approached” (Zamfir 2010: p.169).

The term of Community Development (CD) was officially adopted during a conference of the social policies administrators that was held in Cambridge in 1948, in order to replace the term of *mass education*. Its definition emphasized self-assistance and self-determination as fundamental concepts of CD (Buttu 2008: p. 10). Over the years, the United Nations advanced the idea of *social development* that assimilated the social services approaches to the economic development approaches.

This concern for social development started to settle at all levels, the new strategy of implementation being supported and outlined by key role international organizations: the United Nations, World Health Organization, UNICEF, World Bank, International Labour Organization. One of the most important strategies adopted was the one of basic needs, formally adopted in 1976 by I.L.O. Furthermore, in 1981, UNICEF and W.H.O. adopted through the Alma Ata declaration, the concepts of the strategy founded on satisfying basic needs that considered the economic and social planning, redistribution and satisfying basic needs as essential tasks of governments with regard of social development. (Buttu 2008: p.11).

The paradigm of community development- that focuses on marginal community issues within those developed countries that experience social and economic crisis – requires an extended social development strategy. This fact is not relying on the development of the national economy and on structural reforms so that social development to proceed from the inferior level towards the superior one but it relies on the development empowerment from the inferior level towards the superior one, in other words it relies on the mobilization of communities to engage „internal resources, no matter how humble, complementary to an external financial support.” (Zamfir 2010: p. 170).

The process of community development, in its complexity, is based on the compliance with certain principles that serve as foundation point for the social adjustment (Udangiu 2013: pp. 5-6):

1. The partnership principle: within community development a very important part was played by the involvement of public authorities alongside the members of the community. They may act individually or may be organized as groups, institutions and associations.

2. The transparency principle: provides access to the development outcomes and the opportunity of monitoring and control for those who are involved.

3. The consistency principle: prevents the occurrence of blockages in community development implementation of plans and projects by keeping an internal and external sense.

4. The public interest supremacy principle: contributes to the correct prioritization of the objectives without harming private interests.

5. The undertaken social responsibility principle: refers to the undertaking of a common responsibility by the involved individuals and institutions, thus sharing the benefits and failures.

6. The principle of integral using of resources for development: provides the outreach of all resources and community skills with the aim of providing a harmonious development.

7. The principle of efficiency culture advancement: aims at the limitation of system losses.

8. The sustainability principle: highlights the necessity of the existence of an economic and social sustainability.

9. The principle of inclusive approach: aims at the increase of social cohesion in order to provide an ideal life quality.

10. The principle of social and human investment development: aims at the development of social and individual action abilities.

According to certain authors, community development is tightly bound to the concept of *social capital*. R. D. Putnam, the American political analyst that raised the awareness of the above-mentioned term, relates the decline of social capital to the occurrence of social issues. He argues, for example, that USA registered an unprecedented collapse of the political, civic, social and associative life (in one word of social capital) from the 60's and till present, thus generating negative impact upon the society. Social capital is perceived by Putnam as „features of social organization such as networks, norms and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (Putnam 1995).

„Social capital [...] is a relational asset, in other words it's placed within the inter-individual space and not within different individuals, despite the fact that individuals are the ones that generate it [...]. Social capital is therefore a public asset. The resources to which social capital provides access to are the public assets and the information held by other members of the community who are engaged in the same social relations.” (Niță 2009: p.88).

Malcolm Payne appeals to the survey of researchers Taylor and Roberts, who detected certain approaches that attempt to analyze the community assistance-„community work” relevant for social assistance (Payne 1991: p. 68):

- *community development*, that empowers the disadvantaged groups to come together and advance the services for their community interest;

- *the political action*, that encourages the disadvantaged groups to represent their interests within stronger groups of society;

- *programme development and coordination*, focused on the advancement of new services and on a more efficient cooperation between the services committed to disadvantaged communities;
- more efficient *planning* of services within the community;
- *the community bond/ connection* („community liaison”), that refers to the reinforcement of the ties between agents having similar interests within the community.

### **Social programs and projects**

„Social programs represent a planned and coordinated combination of resources (material, financial, human) and assigned activities namely performed for a determined period of time or up to achieving a distinctly determined objective, with the purpose of satisfying a (a set of) social needs, of preventing or solving a (a set of) social issues." (Mățăuan 1999).

„A project is a series of activities aimed at bringing about clearly specified objectives within a defined time period and with a defined budget which is specific to the project.” (European Commission: 2019a). The project is, thus, the first sub-division of a programme.

Social programs have been designed due to the necessity to approach social issues of individuals or communities in a scheduled and organized manner, using well assigned resources and by effective and adequately scaled provisions.

Social programs may be implemented within various fields like health, education, services, fight against poverty and social exclusion etc.

In the international practice there are two major approaches of the social programs (Mățăuan 2002).

1. The first refers to the implementation tools of national/community policies, the aim of the programme being the resolution of the detected issues. This fact leads to the improvement of some typical elements of the programs such as the long, sometimes indefinite time period, or the amendment of budgets over time. This type of approach is typical for USA or the European Union.

2. The second approach aims to support the beginning of certain processes or to prove the fact that some processes might be settled in various ways. Within this approach, the programs always include clearly defined terms, budgets and objectives.

Social projects fulfill some common constituent elements that are worth taken into account with the goal of achieving them (Mățăuan 1999):

a) The general objective, the development objective and the long-term objective represent the contribution of the project to the corresponding programme.

b) The specific objective (operational, immediate, short-time) refers to the operational goal of a project. It specifically refers to the outcomes that must be reached following the implementation of the project. If the general objective of a project is unique, the specific objectives might be multiple.

c) The outcomes (*outputs, outcomes*) refer to the rewards brought by the physical, mental and behavioral achievement of the project.

d) The resources (*inputs*) are methods used to obtain desired results.

e) The activities represent the way of transforming the resources of the programme into results.

f) The bonds refer to the causal connections between structural elements and external factors.

g) External factors represent elements independent of the framework of the programme/project that shall adversely or favorably influence its evolution.

**Community development and social projects in Romania**

**Severe social problems in Romania**

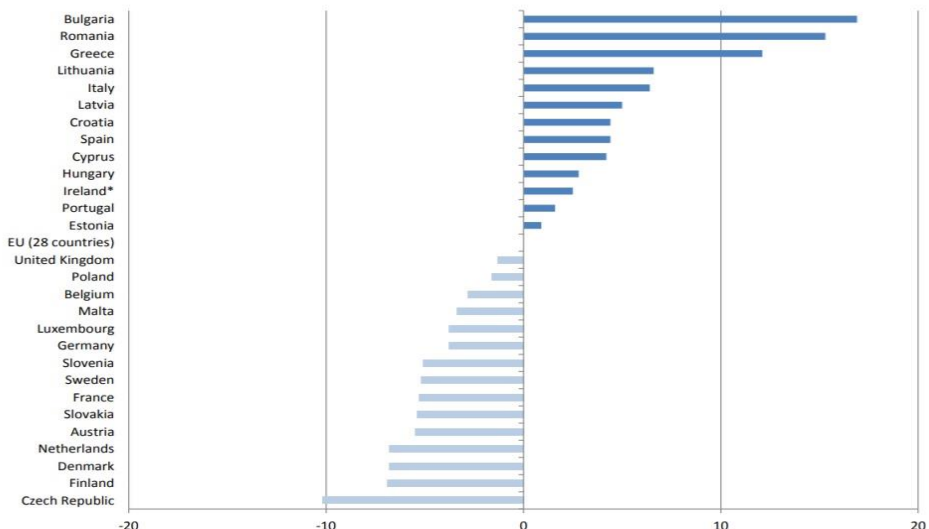
The social report published in 2017 by the Institute of the Romanian Academy for the Research of Life Quality (ICCV), makes a diagnose of Romania’s social status out of the perspective of life quality, analyzing both the current status and the perspectives for the year 2038. According to this report, during 2015, only 59% of Romanians declared themselves satisfied with their lives, fact that indicates imbalance of Romanian social life.

Probably the most severe social issue in Romania is represented by poverty. According to the 2014-2020 National Strategy regarding the social inclusion and poverty prevention „currently one of five Romanians is experiencing poverty caused by inadequate income and a huge proportion of income poverty is persistent, three quarters of poor individuals having been facing this situation for more than three years.” (Ministry of Work, Family, Social Protection and Elderly Persons 2014: pp. 5-61).

One third of the population is affected by severe material deprivation, meaning that they are not able to purchase the items necessary for a decent living. In Romania, there still exist children that can not go to school and do not have access to adequate health services due to material deprivation. There are inequities regarding the provision of basic medical services. There is a significant number of disadvantaged communities where these vulnerabilities cumulate, making the termination of the exclusion cycle impossible in the absence of outside help.

At the level of the year 2016, the Thematic Factsheet of the European Commission regarding the social inclusion presented a ranking of the 28 member states of EU regarding the number of individuals exposed to poverty risk factors or to social exclusion factors and which ranged Romania in second place, following Bulgaria.

Fig. no. 1. Persons exposed to the risk of poverty or social exclusion (2016): standard values



*Source:* European Commission (2018) *European Semester Thematic factsheet* [online] Available: [https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/file\\_import/european-semester-thematic-factsheet-social-inclusion-en-0.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/file_import/european-semester-thematic-factsheet-social-inclusion-en-0.pdf). [accessed 26 November 2019] with data from Eurostat (2018), *EU-SILC. Persons exposed to the risk of poverty or social exclusion: standard values*, online data code: *tsdsc100*

Numerous marginalized groups in Romania, among which rromas, disabled persons and long-term unemployed persons have consistent difficulties concerning the access to the labour market, as opposed to the rest of the population. Moreover, in Romania, the gap among genders with regard to occupying work force is 3.7% higher in Romania than in the EU-28. Rromas are a young population and a growing percentage of the persons newly entered on the labour market originates from rroma families. Rromas are not only a victim of discrimination most of the times, but are also facing higher unemployment rates, which means that many of them are actively searching for work, but do not succeed to find one. Furthermore, the majority of the employed ones have unstable and informal jobs.

### **European Funds, an essential pillar for implementing social projects in Romania**

According to the 2019 State Report concerning Romania, elaborated by the European Commission (European Commission: 2019b), Romania is one of the main beneficiaries of the EU solidarity. The EU funds allocated for Romania are as high as 38.8 billion Euros for the programming period 2014-2020, which could represent almost 2.4% of the GDP, annually. Until the end of 2018, ca. 20.8 billion Euros had been allocated for certain projects.

The European Social Fund (ESF) „is Europe’s main instrument for supporting jobs, helping people get better jobs and ensuring fairer job opportunities for all EU citizens. It works by investing in Europe’s human capital - its workers, its young people and all those seeking a job. ESF financing of EUR 10 billion a year is improving job prospects for millions of Europeans, in particular those who find it difficult to get work” (European Commission: 2019c).

One of the ESF priorities is the employers’ adaptability through gaining new competencies and the companies’ adaptability through implementing new work methods. Other priorities are focused on (Beldiman and Stepan 2017) increasing access to work places, helping young people in their transition from school to the labour market or on ensuring their professional training.

Another priority envisages supporting people from the disadvantaged categories in order for them to obtain a job. This concern is placed within the area of „social inclusion” – signaling the important role of employment in supporting people to better integrate themselves in society and in everyday life.

One of the instruments for implementing the European Social Fund in Romania is the Operational Programme for Human Capital - *POCU* (Ministry of European Funds). *POCU* is elaborated in tight connection with the strategic documents at European and national level and focuses on the valorification of human capital, as a resource for future sustainable development. The interventions proposed within *POCU* shall contribute to meeting the objective of the Partnership Agreement 2014-2020 and of the three strategies in the field of education: the National Strategy concerning the

Reduction of Early School Abandon, the National Strategy for Tertiary Education and the National Strategy for Life-Long Learning.

With integrated interventions planned in the field of employment, social inclusion and education, POCU operates as a mean for stimulation economic growth and social cohesion. Social inclusion and fighting poverty are an integrated element of the interventions aiming at promoting a balanced development and social cohesion. The reduction of poverty and exclusion, the improvement of the access to quality social and health services, the development of social economy shall be monitored at the level of the programme, with the purpose of promoting social inclusion and fighting poverty, according to the provisions of the relevant national strategies and contributing to the objectives followed in this field.

The interventions proposed within POCU shall contribute to reaching the general objective established through the PA 2014-2020, to reaching the targets to which Romania committed itself through the National Reform Programme, as well as to the efficient implementation of the relevant strategies in the field, through:

- reducing the number of persons facing the risk of poverty or social exclusion, through the implementation of integrated measures with focus on the marginalized communities;

- increasing the number of persons belonging to the vulnerable groups that overcame the vulnerability situation;

- developing social economy and promoting social entrepreneurship;

- improving the quality and the access to medical assistance services;

- ensuring the transition from the institutionalized care system to services offered within the community.

Generally, the results targeted with regard to social inclusion and fighting discrimination envisage the substantial reduction of poverty prevalence, especially among children, young people, romas and other disadvantaged groups; a better life for the persons coming from the institutionalized system who integrate themselves into the community, better employment opportunities from the persons from vulnerable groups /who are affected by poverty.

In order to reach the proposed objectives, 7 Priority Axes were established within POCU, adressed by 13 investment priorities.

- 1. Priority Axis: Initiative jobs for young people
- 2. Priority Axis: Improvement of the situation of young people from the NEETs category (not in education, employment or training)
- 3. Priority Axis: Jobs for everyone
- 4. Priority Axis: Social inclusion and fighting poverty
- 5. Priority Axis: Local development under the responsibility of the community
- 6. Priority Axis: Education and competencies
- 7. Priority Axis: Technical assistance

### **Conclusions**

Nearly 30 years have passed since the abolition of the communist regime in Romania, but there are, still, a large number of problems to be solved.



Romania's accession to the EU, in 2007, opened the road for accessing the most relevant financial support instruments dedicated to the reduction of economical and social disparities among the member states.

With one of the highest poverty rates and one of the lowest life quality rates in Europe, Romania is facing the challenge of finding the most appropriate and accessible resources for supporting the most vulnerable social categories. Social problems are a particular category, for which, sadly, a complete and radical solution on the long term is not possible. Even the most developed states in Europe and in the world are facing difficulties with regard to ensuring a unitary and satisfying life level and the equal access to resources for all members of the society. There are several social problems that become even more intense on the background of economical, industrial and technological progress: demographic decrease, problems of the minorities, migration, pollution, the gap between the poorest and the richest social categories etc.

Social initiatives financed from European funds were and remain, still, one of the most efficient instruments for providing support to the most challenged members of the community. After a pre-accession period and a first stage of European financing (2007-2013), Romania finds itself, currently, in the second financing period (2014-2020).

The implementation of projects financed from the ESF was not an easy task for our government and the corresponding authorities, but they have learned from previous mistakes, they have grown stronger and gained the necessary abilities for management, implementation and monitoring and the results to be expected at the end of this financing period are, consequently, better accession rates and a higher level of satisfaction among the beneficiaries.

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